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Web 2.0 and deliberation. The ongoing practice of political debate in weblogs

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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- 1 Debates on the power of the internet to transform political systems and democratic practices have been a topic of academic research and discussion over the past two decades. After a brief period characterized by some disappointment, over the last 7-8 years the idealism related to the Internet has resurfaced with an added impetus, because of the appearance of a broader set of tools that enhance the audiences' engagement.
- 2 A new conceptualization of political participation has appeared. It is in close relationship with our current era, the Web 2.0, which consists of the provision of web tools, with participatory and interactive features. Within this mediascape, the most popular ways of communication are the social networks (YouTube, Facebook) and the growing blogosphere. All of these technological proposals withstand the trademark of integrating the public's participatory culture as a trademark. Manuel Castells proposes this reality as the new global public sphere.
- 3 This article focuses on the analysis of one specific technology platform - the blogosphere. Blogs are rooted within the ideology of the new information technologies, with which they share their virtues. However, they also summon some meager realities. As a starting point, we hypothesize that the blogosphere, due to its openness, interactivity and participation, constitutes a particular form of public sphere in a discursive space, with a political density, in which practices of deliberation can take place. Then, we will evaluate the debate concerning the identification of the blogosphere as a concept of the public sphere, within the discourse and ideology of the new media. Through another approach,

we will evaluate the suitability of the potential uses of blogs and the normative principles of deliberation. We will do this by referencing the normative requirements of deliberative models and patterns of interaction between authors and readers of blogs. By means of this approach, it will be possible 1) to confront the conditions for the existence of deliberation with the critical points of the generalized use of the blogosphere; 2) to identify the basic elements of a framework of analysis to assess the existence of deliberative practices in the blogosphere; and 3) summarize the results of empirical studies conducted on this subject. Regarding this latter issue, we will analyze, in this paper, the quality of the debate around the concept of "austerity" in two blogs that are politically connected with parties. We believe that it will be possible to gain knowledge on the adequacy of the technical conditions for deliberation and, also, the most common discursive uses that occur in the blogosphere.

1. From the beginning: the concept of public sphere

- 4 Basically, the easiness of the use and the development of new communication channels have sparked off an explosion of *grassroots* blogging (practice) and other phenomena of participation. This new enthusiasm for the internet was highlighted by *Time Magazine* in 2006, when it selected "You" as *Person of the Year*, alluding to the public use of Web 2.0 that acknowledge unknown citizens as an important part of the spawning of a new digital democracy (see Grossman, 2006). The U.S. presidential election in 2008 made use of social networks as important vehicles of information and tools for political mobilization (Castells, 2008). Recently, developments in the Islamic world scene have proposed new important information and communication technologies to tackle this problem.
- 5 The uses of these technologies for political purposes have proved to be important concerning the role and effects of the Internet communication. It is within this context that *blogging* has been in the areas of online activity that has gained more attention within the revival of interest regarding the political potential that the Internet summons. Blogs, or Weblogs, have existed since 1980. However, recent technological developments have provided them with greater deal of flexible and user friendly tier. By taking this to the political participation arena, we can see that the easiness of communication through blogs - among other tools - considerably decreased the costs. On the whole, today anyone can regularly publish their points of views. It is also possible to add interactive features to comment, update, and link to other sites. Consequently, the easiness of administration of online content by common users has also enhanced the reputation of an environment marked by a spirit of participation, in which everyone has something to say.
- 6 The term "blogosphere" was first used in 2002 (coined by William Quick, science fiction author) to describe the network of blogs and their interconnections. It became a common word in the following years. Today, it refers to forms with a sense of community and a real existence with undeniable political relevance. In a recent report by *Techonorati*, 2009 is referred as the year of revolutions because elections were organized by blogs, bloggers and blogging at levels never seen before. The association of the blogosphere ideals of public sphere will be easy to suggest, but, as the idea of public sphere, they are also difficult to put into practice.
- 7 Yet, it is clear that the idea of the functioning of the Internet as public sphere precedes the emergence of the Web 2.0 phase and naturally the blogosphere. In the early years of the implementation of the Internet as a tool (that is the 90s), the classic work of

Habermas was used as a theoretical ground, to claim the Internet and its potential to support new forms of community and the public sphere. This is particularly verifiable in the work of the earliest and most influential thinkers of this period of the Internet, e.g. Howard Rheingold, who is associated with the idea of "virtual community". In his 1995 book, *Virtual Community: Finding Connection in a Computerized World*, Rheingold draws parallels between the Habermas' idea of public sphere and online communication with a clear interpretation. He argues about the existence of an intimate connection between the informal conversations, such as those taking place in communities and virtual communities, and the willingness of large social groups to govern themselves without monarchs or dictators. We believe that this connection shares the same sociopolitical metaphor associated with the idea of cyberspace, because it occurs in a sort of virtual space that has been designated by experts as the public sphere.

- 8 Today, it is possible to see that Rheingold's ideas about the virtual public sphere provided inspiration for much of the theoretical work developed in the following years. More recently, it has been sustained that online communication meets the requirements to achieve the basic requirements of Habermas's normative theory about the democratic public sphere. This proposal is because they are a universal media, described as anti-hierarchical, offering non-coercive communication, freedom of expression, unrestricted agenda and communication outside traditional political institutions. It is within this proposal that e.g. Aaron Barlow believes that blogs will promote the rebirth of the most genuine public sphere in a similar way to their inspiring version, to redeem the kind of debate and journalism practiced in the United States before the emergence of the current conglomerated commercial news media in the nineteenth century. Barlow writes in an early landmark study regarding subject that in the Tocqueville's view, the dimension of *grassroots* journalism in 1830 was an end in itself, while it was the ways of expression of popular feelings. He understood very well that a vibrant local press served as a cornerstone of democracy, and that its loss would be a loss for people. Today, the increasing number of blogs is the return to the kind of journalism that Tocqueville observed (Barlow, 2007). Thus, the existence of a parallelism can be drawn: behind its technological manifestations it can be assumed that there is little new in the blogosphere. The blogs will carry the debate (within this realm debate that might be suffocated, but it is still public debate, yet) for a new forum; however there is nothing revolutionary in what blogs are doing (Barlow, 2008).

2. Deliberation in the blogosphere

- 9 If new technologies are now regarded with high levels of optimism, and are assigned high expectations to the Internet for political participation, a problem remains – the unclear discussions concerning *electronic democracy*. Still, we do not have a clear understanding about how the Internet and other forms of electronic communication may contribute to the rise of a new type of public sphere - and thus to a new kind of democracy. It is within this framework that the growing importance of the blogosphere has proposed a theoretical landscape that gives consistency to the idea of a new deliberative space, made possible because new advances in information technologies have defined the Internet as a new 'public sphere' for deliberative democracy (Maynor, 2007). This rhetoric is essential to summon the concept of cyberspace as a setting for sharing collective, which allows public interaction and information sharing, and thereby provides the basis for

revitalizing the public sphere and democracy. Thus, we are led to the notion of virtual public sphere, the central concept from which draws any theoretical and empirical work around a digital model of deliberative democracy (Dahlberg, 2001). It is within this background that we propose to discuss the adequacy and the potential of the practices of communication in the blogosphere by comparing them to the normative principles of deliberation.

- 10 In its ideal model, public sphere is proposed as a space of deliberation where rational consensus is the plan pursued by all genuine discourse. In other words, it is through deliberation that the purpose of the public sphere becomes obvious. Deliberation comes in this regard as the critical factor for an assessment of the blogosphere as a new form of public sphere. We already know that most of the definitions of deliberation assume a starting point based on the distinction of forms of deliberative discourse in relation to other forms of discourse - non-deliberative. However, as shown by Michael Schudson (1997), not any conversation contributes to the construction of political judgments. This author establishes a distinction between 1) *social conversation*, which has no set agenda or specific purpose, which tends to happen when people think similarly, and that deals with issues such as personal experiences, shared beliefs and types of relationship and perception of the others and 2) *oriented conversation to solve problems*, and this way gives rise to a public discussion, which brings together people with different views and values, also interested and informed, and guided by a very precise goal - the common good. This kind of discussion would be the only one that is able to lead citizens to deliberative processes aimed at decision-making and participation of citizens in the development of standards and law. In short, as Chambers writes, not every conversation is discursive. Conversations are only approaching ideal conditions of discourse if they take into account a defined set of procedural rules (Chambers, 1995). In turn, a discourse can be understood in Sunstein's definition of this issue when it is both stated and received as a contribution to public deliberation about an issue (Sunstein, 1993).
- 11 But, what preconditions must occur to make deliberation possible? As a starting point, the *ability* of individuals to discuss public issues together is an essential element for the development of public opinion and to promote civic engagement. Consequently, and in its strictest but also more general terms, a discourse must conform to the *rationality*, and public debate should have the purpose of obtaining a rational consensus (Elster, 1997). In turn, for deliberation to occur, public debate must take place amongst a *heterogeneous* group of people with divergent perspectives. What makes the deliberative opinion is not the simple fact of being structured after careful analysis, supported by evidence and arguments, but also taking into account the opinions of other opposites (Witschge, 2004).
- 12 By using these aspects as a theoretical background, concerning the discourse and opinion, there are four critical issues to be addressed in relation to practices of deliberation, whose assessment will contribute to discuss the potential uses of deliberative political blogs.
- 13 The first point is related with the conceptualization of deliberation that political theorists do in some different forms. For some, it is unquestionable that the nature of deliberation is to help individuals to redefine their views, and eventually to identify common goals and means for the complex situations of social life. It is with this perspective that many theorists of deliberation detract the polarization of political debate, since it will promote the convergence of views, reducing the tolerance for opposing views and hindering the development of consensus. This is not a consensual position. Other theorists sustain that

even an ideal deliberative procedure will not produce consensus (Cohen, 1997), or even deny that such a consensus (or common good) should be the goal of deliberation (Young, 2001). As we will see, this is a critical point, because polarization is one of the most recurrently characteristics connected with the blogosphere.

- 14 A second issue focuses on the possibility to consider blogs as promoters of political participation. There is no doubt that high levels of political participation are seen as a positive factor in a vibrant democracy. Some researchers argue that more participation and civic involvement are factors favourable to a more responsible, more legitimate and therefore to an increase in the quality of citizenship practices. We know, however, that understanding the concept of participation in the deliberation implies going beyond the logic of the procedures. This means that we have not only to take into account a communication approach that is not reducible to a simple quantitative assessment of argumentative exchanges, but also to seek to assess the quality of these discursive exchanges (Ferreira, 2011).
- 15 The third aspect is linked to the previous one and relies on the fact that unlike traditional media, blogs make available to common individuals (not elite) a relatively cheap and affordable way to express their opinions. Consequently, we believe that the diversity of blogs on politics will result, at least potentially, in a higher range of ideological agendas in the blogosphere, compared to traditional media. However, besides this aspect, the question to be discussed refers to the type of participation discourse that occurs there. That is, it is important to consider the uses of this technology in terms of the normative standards of the notion of public sphere. In other words: does the variety of blogs and participants in the blogs provide discursive views generating a real exchange, or do the views of various participants reinforce each other, around a single perspective? Or, last of all, if they assume or not a political or democratic discourse.
- 16 In this respect, we plan to add one last factor: blogs are an essentially interactive channel in the way they allow readers to leave comments, feedback and answers to each other, but also creating links to other blogs, linking their readers (and commentators) to a whole network of other actors, and enabling the creation of complex forms of dissemination of ideas and debate - e.g. *cross-linking*, i.e. the existence of links that cross blogs with different ideological orientation.
- 17 Finally, it is also noted here that the structures of interactive blogs depend, of course, on the communicative behavior of the actors who operate in them. In this case, the *authors* of blogs and their *readers*, whose default behavior must be considered.

3. Weblog uses and the outlines of an analytical framework

- 18 From a theoretical review, some important trends can be drawn about the potential of blogs and their uses. One of the prominent authors in this field is Cass Sunstein, who carried out an assessment of the normative content and uses promoted by information technology. With regard specifically to the subject of this study, Sunstein believes that the blogosphere increases the amount of available information and perspectives. We propose this as a great virtue for people with open minds and curiosity. He notes the presence of blogs in real social networks, with multiple connections, and not just segregated communities. However, he points out an important study carried on a sample

of 1400 political blogs, that showed that 91% of the links were directed to sites ideologically similar (*like-minded*), and only 25% of the connections are involved with crossing ideological genuine and substantive discussion (see Sunstein, 2009).

- 19 It is within this line of thought that he suggests concepts such as *fragmentation* and *polarization*, on the basis of a self-regulation mechanism that encourages users to organize contents and to structure the uses in order to produce and consume information in line with their most basic preferences. "The screening is inevitable as how to avoid overload, to impose some order in relation to an incommensurable number of information sources. Many people take the opportunity to devote attention to the views they find most enjoyable (...) There's a natural human tendency to choose entertainment and news that do not disrupt our pre-established vision of the world" (Sunstein, 2009). As a result, if the common dimensions in the blogosphere act as a model for thinking how people use blogs, is it reasonable to conclude that the levels of discourse are mostly sustained from partial views. To this extent, Sunstein clearly states that it is an overstatement to conclude blogs as an incarnation of deliberative ideals (Sunstein, 2009).
- 20 Other researchers have offered an apparently opposite view, e.g. Benkler and Shaw (2010). They also consider that internet has increased the range of options available and thus provides users with a growing capacity to participate and, consequently, develop democratic practices. In the blogosphere, they argue that blogs enable the public and enhance deliberative democracy. However, instead of fragmentation, they see diversity, and while acknowledging a certain level of homophily of primary groups (i.e., the propensity to join the blogging blogs or sites with a partisan or ideological orientation similar to theirs) they consider that the key question for a set of democratic theories is who has the opportunity to be heard by everyone and the ability to structure with a sufficient level of coherence around an issue, to make it a credible theme to the political agenda of society (Benkler & Shaw, 2010). Benkler and Shaw also suggest opportunities for the study of discursive practices using qualitative methods, to capture factors such as the opportunities that offer support for production and broadcast content, to mobilize for action and further aspects of the content and style.
- 21 After addressing the theoretical framework of this discussion, we will now identify the features most frequently described by literature about political *bloggers*. We summon the following aspects: blog authors do not justify the rules that follow the structure of their blogs, or the control over the content that they produce, which reflects, for the better or for the worse, their opinions (or the views expressed in comments by readers) and, finally, it is based purely on personal criteria. And, as it was said before, it is common the homophily.
- 22 *Readers* also tend to choose blogs whose authors have similar criteria to their own opinion about what is important, and who observe events and topics with close interpretive lens. One explanation for this trend is because blog readers have a high level of interest and attention for political issues. So, when looking for information they do so motivated by a desire to reassert pre-existing views. Having knowledge on political affairs has resulted in the prior existence of a significant number of consolidated information, and a greater resistance to changes of attitudes. Thus, reading a blog proposes a pattern of behavior marked by selective exposure: readers of blogs agree with them. As a result, it is expect to find in blog readers two particular characteristics: the homophily shared with the authors of the blogs, and substantial levels of polarization, caused by the cumulative

effect of a high consumption of information with little ideological heterogeneity (Lawrence et al. 2010).

- 23 Sunstein stated, not many years ago, that we know very little about the blogosphere - the empirical analysis is in its early stages (Sunstein, 2009). However, we believe that it is possible to synthesize the broad outlines of an analytical framework that consists of four angles of approach for the evaluation of the role of political blogs in relation to practices of deliberation. The first line of analysis refers to an assessment of the quality of deliberative discourse, essentially following the coding categories drawn from a discourse ethics - considering and quantifying the application of a set of rules: open *participation*, *justification* of assertions, consider the *common good*, *respect* for other participants and a *constructive* attitude. Three others analytical perspectives are largely complementary, interdependent and instrumental in relation to the first. We refer to the following elements - patterns of homophily (in both *posts* and comment boxes at each entrance); the existence of ideological *cross-linking*; and, finally, the nature of that *cross-linking* (does it supports homophily or debate?).

24

4. Political blogs in Portugal: a brief case study on the “austerity” idea

- 25 To define the object of the present study, we used a tool called the *Blogometro*, which identifies the most used blogs. And through this process we had our sample. It is available in the following website www.blogometro.aventar.edu, which references the most viewed blogs among those registered in *Sitemeter* (www.sitemeter.com), a website that presents traffic information of the registered blogs. When we collected the data (October 10, 2013), we selected the two most viewed collective blogs with a political nature – this identified *Blasfémias* (in 16th place, with an average of 6415 visitors per day) and *5 Dias* (in 25th place, with an average of 3978 visitors on a daily basis). In order to describe these accounts, we can characterize *Blasfémias* as a liberal political blog, supporter of right-winged political parties currently in government, and *5 Dias* as a socialist or left wing political blog, identified with the actions taken by the communist party and the Left Block parties in Portugal.
- 26 In both blogs, we noticed the existence of an internal search engine. In this tool, we placed the term “austerity”, and we selected the 5 most recent posts, and respective comments.
- 27 The results are shown in table 1.

Table 1. Posts and comments selected from Blasfémias

Date	Title	comment no.
September 16, 2013	Austerity works only in Sweden	108
July 16 2013	From austerity	36

July 2, 2013	Reaping the fruits of austerity	14
July 2, 2013	Austerity will end?	16
July 2, 2013	Who blame in a few years by believed that austerity was a fanaticism of Vítor Gaspar?	25

- 28 After the arguments used in each of the posts in the *Blasfémias* blog, concerning the notion of austerity, had been analyzed, we were able to summarize the arguments around the following ideas: austerity works, it is inevitable given the shortage of financial resources, it produces positive effects, it should be considered as something "normal", and it is the right option, although unpopular. Associated with these ideas, but in a complementary way, critics to the performance of the judges from of the Constitutional Tribunal were also presented. Still, any alternative is depreciated, with the defense of political action by the previous Finance Minister Vítor Gaspar, the public face of the austerity policy idea. On the other hand, the thesis proposed in the selected posts of *5 Dias* blog can be synthesized in the following assertions: austerity is the "mother of all evils", a compromise between the parties would result in the maintenance of austerity, a call for participation in the strike against austerity.

Table 2. Posts and comments selected from 5 Dias

Date	Title	comment no.
September 22, 2013	From the banality of evil or as the dehumanization and totalitarianism are daughters of austerity	19
August 19, 2013	Creative austerity	14
July 12, 2013	Appointment of austerity salvation	2
June 23, 2013	Stopping austerity general strike!	3
May 31, 2013	Statement by João Ferreira in the debate "Unlocking Portugal from austerity"	1

- 29 Then, we considered a framework of analysis which fits the coding categories previously defined. It was drawn from an ethical perspective of the discourse. Namely: open participation, justification of assertions, common good, respect, constructive attitude and the existence of homophily/ideological cross-linking. To this extent, we also considered the existence of open participation when there occurs the opportunity to comment, being the amount of comments the expression of the degree of participation. We considered the existence or the nonexistence of rational justification whenever the main assertion was supported by logical arguments or had verifiable nature – that can be classified as fragile, acceptable or strong depending on the quality of the presented arguments. Similarly, from the perspective of the common good, we designed a framework of assertions, which could be regarded through explicit or implicit perspectives. Apart from these aspects, we

also verified if there existed or not elements of depreciation or insults that violated the legal principles of respect. Concerning attitudes, we defined them in two steps: first we identified its tone as positive or negative, secondly we classified its pragmatic function (appeal, complaint, criticism, explanation...). Finally, and in the light of comments made, we noticed the existence of patterns of homophily, with an exclusive or prevalence (dominance) pattern or if it was a minority practice. We analyzed the existence of ideological cross linking in the posts and comments. These analyses can be seen in tables 3, 4 and 5.

Table 3. Blasfémias framework of analysis/coding categories

BLASFÉMIAS	<i>Sweden Austerity</i>	<i>From Austerity</i>	<i>Fruits of Austerity</i>	<i>Will end?</i>	<i>Who do we blame?</i>
Participation	Yes (108)	Yes (36)	Yes (14)	Yes (16)	Yes (25)
Justification	acceptable	Fragile	nonexistent	nonexistent	nonexistent
Common good	explicit	explicit	nonexistent	Implicit	implicit
Respect	depreciation	depreciation insult	depreciation	depreciation	depreciation
Attitude	positive explanation	positive explanation	positive explanation	positive explanation	positive explanation
Homophily	dominant	exclusive	dominant	dominant	dominant
Cross linking	Yes	Yes	nonexistent	nonexistent	Yes

Table 4. 5 Dias framework of analysis/coding categories

5 DIAS	<i>evil banalization</i>	<i>creative austerity</i>	<i>parties commitment</i>	<i>general strike</i>	<i>Debate release...</i>
Participation	Yes (19)	Yes (14)	Yes (2)	Yes (2)	Yes (1)
Justification	fragile	acceptable	acceptable	Acceptable	acceptable
Common good	explicit	implicit	explicit	Explicit	explicit
Respect	depreciation	depreciation	Respect	Respect	Respect
Attitude	negative explanation	positive explanation	positive explanation	mobilize for action	positive explanation
Homophily	dominant	dominant	exclusive	minority	exclusive

Cross linking	nonexistent	Nonexistent	nonexistent	nonexistent	nonexistent
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Table 5. Comparative framework of analysis/coding categories

	BLASFÉMIAS	5 DIAS	TOTAL
Participation			
Comment	199	38	237
Average per input	39,8	7,6	23,7
Justification			
Enough	1	3	4
Low	1	2	3
Nonexistent	3	0	3
Common good			
Implicit	2	4	6
Inexistent	1	0	1
Explicit	2	1	3
Attitude			
Explanation positive	5		5
Explanation negative		4	4
Mobilize for action		1	1
Homophily			
Exclusive	1	2	3
Dominant	4	2	6
Minority	0	1	1

- 30 From the data analysis we can notice the existence of levels of participation with significance, with an average of 23.7 comments per entry. However, this value should be framed by two aspects that work on opposite directions: on the one hand, we can see that a bias of this magnitude is achieved due to a particularly high stake in one of the *Blasfémias* blog entries; on the other hand, these values are meaningful because they come about in a environment without consolidated participation habits. Indeed, if we notice

the relative significance of these levels of participation, we also find that it is participation without discursive stance (as would be the request for clarification or the response to an argument). As a result, we could not identify any evidence of changing opinions over the discursive exchanges that were analyzed.

- 31 Data also showed the prevalence of homophily, which is embodied in a cyberbalkanization phenomenon (in the same blog, the same opinions, the same information and, most likely, the same readers). Broadly speaking, this is what some literature describes as *preaching to the converted*, which accepts low levels of arguments. As a result, all the discursive process is characterized by well-defined polarization patterns, supported in extreme views. What each blog puts forward is not an inclusive form of debate between different points of view, but rather a private conversation guided by a structured discursive line – despite the significant amount of authors who write in each blog, and the fact of being open to readers in the comments section.
- 32 We concluded that the concept of deliberation does not apply to the more general type of communication in these two political blogs. It could be applied to the more general concept of participation. However, while lighter form of social interaction, with little density in a political debate plan. More than a deliberative space of intersubjective debate, these blogs propose themselves as spaces for sharing converged opinions.
- 33 These results come into the wider debate about the discursive – or deliberative – potential of online conversation forms, where dialogue and difference are central to the deliberative model (Dahlberg, 2001). Nevertheless, understood in the perspective described above, blogs are not the space of debate among individuals with different points of view. Instead, they are serving another purpose – rather than opportunities to review and, where appropriate, for change of perspective of authors and readers, blogs reinforce views, leading them towards a political polarization that grows over time. In the limit, these forms of interaction may be considered forms of conversation in a private sphere, and thus do not provide the conditions for inclusiveness and publicity required by deliberation (Bohman, 1996). The results also follow the pessimistic sense about the potential of deliberative discourse in the blogosphere. If he welcomes the role of blogs in public debate, as they have the "parasitic function" to criticize and correct the *mainstream* media, he believes that Internet tends to fragment the debate, and so gives rise to a vast number of isolated public issues.

Conclusions

- 34 The case study presented addresses some traits that were presented throughout the literature review: in general the various communities organized in the blogosphere are not structured around the discursive construction of a consensus, nor accept divergent views – on the contrary, it silences dissenting voices and encourages the emergence of small groups of like-minded individuals. According to Sunstein, this process can lead to a cyberbalkanization of the Internet, splintering on groups of focused individuals with the same views, exposed to the same information, confirming the views that are previously owned. As a result, like in the majority of work undertaken, we can observe three aspects here: the existence of patterns of homophily between political blogs, the tendency for blogs with the same ideological inclinations to intersect each other, a tendency for readers to read blogs aligned with their ideological and party preferences, and even the existence of patterns of polarization – the tendency of evolution from moderate to extreme views.

Although we live in an era that celebrates diversity. In spite of the fact that blogs are an excellent tool for intellectual debate, the truth is that the analysis of the blogosphere reveals, in its most common traits, great ideological homogeneity and low - or none - conversation (Freese, 2009).

- 35 Under these previously described conditions, the concept of deliberation does not apply to the type of communication widespread through political blogs. On another level, another concept could take its place: we refer to the concept of participation. Within this scope, we propose that writing a political blog would be taken as a form of political participation, with indelible touch to political discourse. In its most refined, with deliberation – and by this way it gets the credibility of a form of engagement with political significance. It is true that blogosphere promote political participation and opportunities for involvement. Indeed, a closer look will show that this will be possible at the expense of some easing of the concepts of participation and involvement in digital interactions. Participants in the blogosphere are motivated by a desire to participate and by a desire to exchange views - but not change their opinion or seek different opinions.
- 36 Moreover, concealed by the idea of participation is often a mythical idea of civil society - where, however, not all ideas are democratic, or at least an unquestionable contribution to democracy. Deliberation in its full sense is an activity of high demand and consequently, people consider it uncomfortable and usually avoid it (Witschge, 2004) –it seems to happen the same in online and offline environments. Thus, if the designated Web 2.0 can provide real avenues for those wishing to conduct deliberative processes, it is known that this is really unusual across the blogosphere.
- 37 As Bohman writes, positions optimistic about democracy through cyberspace suffer from conceptual problems: that technologically mediation, in itself, is constitutive of new possibilities. However, technology is intricate in social contexts that shape their potential achievement. Indeed, if the discourse in the blogosphere suffers from lack of diversity or avoids the adversarial debate, this will happen not because of blogs, but the characteristics of society itself.

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ABSTRACTS

This article focuses on the critical analysis of the blogosphere, in order to question its potential technological and political uses. As a starting point, we hypothesize that the blogosphere constitutes a particular form of public sphere in a discursive space, with a political density, in which practices of deliberation can take place. We will evaluate the debate concerning the identification of the blogosphere with the concept of the public sphere in order to develop this argument. We will do it by referencing the normative requirements of the deliberative model and patterns of interaction between authors and readers of blogs. By means of this approach, it will be possible to 1) confront the conditions for the existence of deliberation with the critical points of the generalized use of the blogosphere; 2) identify the basic elements of a framework of analysis to assess the existence of deliberative practices in the blogosphere; and 3) summarize the results of empirical studies conducted on this subject.

Concerning these issues, we will analyze the quality of the debate around the concept of "austerity" in two blogs that are politically connected with parties. Data showed the prevalence of homophily, which is embodied in a cyberbalkanization phenomenon. Therefore, all the discursive process is characterized by well-defined polarization patterns, supported in extreme views. We concluded that the concept of deliberation does not apply to the more general type of communication in these two political blogs. It could be applied to a concept of participation; however, from a deliberative standpoint, it could only be understood as a lighter form of social interaction, with little density in a political plan.

O presente artigo centra-se numa análise crítica da blogosfera, com o objetivo de questionar os seus potenciais usos tecnológicos e políticos. Como ponto de partida, seguimos a hipótese de a blogosfera constituir uma forma particular de esfera pública situada num espaço discursivo, com densidade política, onde podem ocorrer práticas de deliberação. Para sustentar este argumento, fazemos uma avaliação do debate que identifica a blogosfera com o conceito de esfera pública. Para esse fim, tomamos como referência os elementos normativos do modelo deliberativo e os padrões de interação entre autores e leitores de blogues. Desenvolvida esta abordagem será possível 1) confrontar as condições de existência de deliberação com os aspectos críticos do uso comum da blogosfera; 2) identificar elementos básicos de um quadro analítico para avaliar a existência de práticas deliberativas na blogosfera; e 3) sumarizar resultados empíricos obtidos sobre esta matéria.

Tomando em conta estes elementos, será analisada a qualidade do debate sobre o conceito de "austeridade" levado a cabo em dois blogues, conotados política e partidariamente. Desta análise, os dados sugerem a prevalência de homofilia enquanto parte de fenómenos de cyberbalkanização. Além disso, verificamos que todos os processos discursivos se caracterizam por padrões bem definidos de polarização, sustentados em perspetivas extremadas. Concluímos que o conceito de deliberação não é identificável nas formas mais comuns de comunicação existentes nos dois blogues estudados. Pode neles ser identificado o conceito de participação; contudo, e a partir da perspetiva deliberativa, este conceito apenas pode ser entendido enquanto forma ligeira de interação social, de reduzida densidade num plano político.

INDEX

Keywords: democracy, deliberation, public sphere, online, blogosphere, political participation

Palavras-chave: democracia, deliberação, esfera pública, on-line, blogosfera, participação política

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